The Ecofetish: Green Consumerism in Women's Magazines

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Surprisingly little research has examined environmental communication in the mass media from a feminist perspective, even as environmental communication (as a subfield of media studies) is experiencing rapid growth. This shortage is particularly interesting because like feminism and communication scholarship, feminism and green theory have often been intertwined. Theorists from both fields recognize common concerns: the fetishization of consumer goods, the twin subjugation of women and nonhuman nature to patriarchal desires, and the neoliberal reliance on divisive individualist discourse, to name a few. But perhaps because it is a relatively new area of media studies (research dates only to the early 1970s), environmental communication has not yet been the subject of much—if any—feminist analysis. Starting with a preliminary examination of environmental messages in the women's popular press (specifically, women's magazines), this essay addresses that lack.

Although long established, the relationship between feminism and environmentalism is certainly complicated. Beginning in the 1970s, ecofeminists identified a connection between the marginal status of both women and nature compared with masculine and economic interests. Through traditional feminine roles as mothers and nurturers, women have been theorized as somehow closer to the natural, nonhuman world. Some feminist theorists have embraced this linkage (Warren 1990; Plumwood 1991), while others have rejected it as restrictive and essentialist (Davion 1994; Seager 2003). More recently, women have been situated closer to the environment for a somewhat different reason. Because the majority of household purchasing decisions are made by women (Rodino-Colocino

WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 38: 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2010)

2006), there is growing social acceptance of the idea that women have unique environmental agency and an obligation to ensure that their families are living in an environmentally responsible manner. Thus we are seeing a surge in green commercialism that primarily targets women, who are now expected to take responsibility for addressing environmental problems that are largely the result of patriarchal capitalist expansion.

This phenomenon is played out most visibly in the media, where messages aimed at women are increasingly built around commodity-based solutions to environmental ills. Applying a feminist outlook to environmental communication studies helps make sense of these media messages and how they either reflect or distort—and ultimately affect—women's lived experiences. Most simply put, a feminist point of view is one that recognizes the deeply sexist attitudes encoded in social behaviors and belief systems (Hirschmann 2003); with respect to environmental communication, this might mean cultivating an awareness of how messages identify women either with the environment or in relation to it. Such awareness would serve two purposes: first, it would reveal gendered tendencies in environmental communication; second, it would help make sense of female audiences' reception and interpretation of environmental messages in the media.

More than forty years ago, economist Anthony Downs speculated that media coverage of environmental problems would be subject to an "issue-attention cycle," eventually falling out of public view: "We should not underestimate the American public's capacity to become bored—especially with something that does not immediately threaten them" (1972, 47). Downs's prediction has been at least partially supported by recent research (Trumbo 1996; Brossard, Shanahan, and McComas 2004). When environmental issues receive media attention, the coverage has often been sensational and event-oriented, lacking the kind of context that might increase issue salience among American citizens (Guber 2003). Further, the generic word "green" was adopted as an all-purpose signifier by the media in the 1980s, and used heavily in environmental issue reporting to indicate an ecologically responsible stance or behavior (Anderson 1997). The term has made its way into commercial discourse as well, employed to describe a wide range of household products, from biodegradable window cleaners to low-flow showerheads. Troubled by a lack of specificity in this secondary usage, Sandilands argued for a narrowing of the definition so that as an adjective, the word "green" would implicitly

include "reference to the systemic problems of over-production and over-consumption" (1993, 45). However, such an association is rarely made clear in the mass media.

The issue of potentially misleading or oversimplified presentation of environmental problems is likely a symptom of structural flaws in the media system, in particular the influence of corporate interests that are able to limit content that could challenge their economic bottom line. Despite these challenges, the environment as a broad topic has demonstrated remarkable staying power in the mass media. This is perhaps the result of the environmental movement's strategy of "presenting itself, in part, as a new set of material choices," such as buying goods that are energy efficient or made of recycled materials (Luke 1993, 157). Certainly, as environmentalism becomes more closely identified with green consumerism, it becomes somewhat less of a threat to powerful corporations, which could mean increased media presence. But for certain environmental organizations, even amplified media attention can be problematic if the message rests on green consumerism.

In a recent report, the World Wildlife Fund lamented this strategy, identified as a "marketing approach" to environmentalism: "Such approaches may actually serve to defer, or even undermine, prospects for the more far-reaching and systemic behavioral changes that are needed" in order to address environmental problems (Crompton 2008, 5). Yet it is precisely this discourse—built around the idea of simple, painless changes in personal behavior—that has been most eagerly picked up by the mass media.

Women's Magazines and Green Messages

In 1989, a Greenpeace press officer credited women's magazines with "stimulating environmental awareness," saying that they had been "front runners in taking up environmental issues" (quoted in Anderson 1997, 55). But others have seen a less positive trend: messages aimed at women that encourage simple, privatized, and consumer-based solutions to serious and complex environmental problems. By appealing to health claims and valorizing women as the agents (and the household as the site) of environmental change, such messages reify a conservative, middle-class concept of womanhood as the "ideal toward which all environmentally-concerned women should aspire" (Sandilands 1993, 47).

Still, there is emancipatory potential in female-focused environmen-

tal communication. Audience communities constructed around a particular text or textual form (for example, women's magazines) function in two relevant ways. First, they provide "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" (Fraser 1990, 68) or a location for private (i.e., intra-audience) discussion and interpretation. Second, they can also serve as organizational bases for movements or social causes. Whether or not mainstream publications are able to realize this potential is a significant question. Does green communication in women's magazines present more than a "marketing approach" to environmental problems? Does the structure and content of female-specific environmental messages do anything to problematize the elite, conservative ideal of environmentalist femininity described by Sandilands?

Historically, women's magazines have tended to incorporate a "focus on approved behavior, attire, and décor," which has almost always been built around "middle-class standards" and "a rising standard of living" (Walker 2000, 31). These publications, and their audiences, have typically been conscious of social class. The magazines have used this awareness to encourage "appropriate" behavior based on a particular conception of women's roles and feminine domesticity, one that generally supported advertising interests and patriarchal ideology (which often seemed to be one and the same) (Durham 1995, 1996). For these reasons, feminist communication scholars have critiqued women's magazines for being mere "constructions of patriarchal oppression" (D'Enbeau 2008, 17).

Women and Green Consumerism

The patriarchal division of labor has perhaps grown less pronounced over the past several decades, but women are still socialized to be caretakers. Part of this caretaker role has included shopping duties, "for the household's general needs, for her own needs, and for the man's needs" (Meehan 2006, 318). Most women now maintain wage-earning employment outside the home, but they still do the majority of the shopping (Goldman, Heath, and Smith 1991). Still, males have been more prized as a commodity audience, meaning that media content is often structured to satisfy their desires (Meehan 2006). With wage-earning capacities leveling out between genders, we might have expected to see less of this, but, according to Meehan, "women remain marginalized as niches" (320). And even in media outlets that target a female audience, content is often structured around masculine desires (Byerly and Ross 2006; Durham 1998).

The patriarchal media's construction of women as sexual subjects is extremely troubling, to put it mildly. However, this is a subject that has been extensively considered elsewhere and it is therefore not a central focus here. On the other hand, the construction of consumerist subject position, wherein women assume a primary-shopper or "household consumer" role, is highly relevant (Walker 2000). Consumer identities are built on a specific cultural concern (for example, the health of one's children or the protection of endangered species). Generally, such identities appeal to a "modern, cosmopolitan self" (Gallagher 2001, 32). The construction of this consumer subject position, and its link to gender, is one of the central concerns of feminist media scholarship (Gallagher 2001; McRobbie 2008).

Green consumerism is appealing to many people because it provides "an easy symbolic alternative to confronting the structural causes of ecological destruction" (Dryzek 2005, 132; see also Sandilands 1993). Scammell sees the consumer as a potential activist, insofar as the act of consumption is "suffused with citizenship characteristics and considerations" (2000, 351). This seems like a partial endorsement of the marketing approach to environmentalism, as long as the consumer's behavior is based on a conscious awareness of the underlying green issues. Hogeland discusses the ways in which raising such a consciousness—traditionally, one of the central concerns of feminism and environmentalism alike—can be seen as a potential model of social change (2001). In this model, individuals make personal changes that then influence other individuals to make similar changes. Once aggregated, these individual-level behaviors have a significant impact (Stern 2000). Although it has been somewhat successful in boycott campaigns and targeted local-source or small-business consumption, the green consumer strategy "too easily creates a temptation to substitute buying stuff for political action" (Hogeland 2001, 113). Material advantages and rising energy use have sustained a centuries-long rise in living standards in the United States and many other advanced industrial nations, but it is exactly this perpetual abundance of production and consumption that has left us in our current environmental morass (Downs 1972; Sandilands 1993). In his exploration of economics and environmentalism, *Small Is Beautiful*, Schumacher says, "An attitude to life which seeks fulfillment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth—in short, materialism—does not fit into this world, because it contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is

strictly limited" (1973, 14). In other words, there is a disconnect between materialist values in consumer society and the finite capacity of the natural world to sustain our current level of production (Good 2007). However, not all consumption has the same net effect on the environment—some types are worse than others. Food-related consumption, transportation choices, and household operations (such as heating, appliances, cleaning products, and waste disposal) have the most significant negative impact, while personal items and services (such as clothing, jewelry, beauty products, and paper products) are comparatively benign (Brower, Leon, and Union, 1999). Of course, the more significant behaviors are the hardest to modify, and they don't tend to fit well with the marketing approach's rhetoric of environmentalism as a series of small, painless changes.

Discussion about the effect of consumerist environmental messages is not prevalent. (This is not to be confused with discussion about environmental advertising, a subject that has been explored to a much greater degree.) Sandilands posits that consumer-based green rhetoric has narrowed the possibility of a radical environmental outlook and contributed to a "process of depoliticization" (1999,154). This is an example of a tendency McRobbie has identified in the popular press: to "[transform] progressive principles into new forms of constraint" (2008, 537).

If generating meaningful challenges to environmental degradation is neither the intent nor the effect of environmental communication in the women's press, what else might be going on? To capture a snapshot of the messages presented by mainstream women's magazines, four issues of publications with female audiences were selected for analysis. The selected issues were from the same approximate month and all were concurrently available at newsstands: *Glamour* (April 2009), *Marie Claire* (April 2009), *Self* (March 2009), and *Vanity Fair* (May 2009). Although these issues all fall close to Earth Day (April 22), no significant mention of it appeared in any of the articles (*Marie Claire* suggested that readers honor the holiday with ecofriendly sex toys, and one *Glamour* article made a passing reference, as well). All four of the magazines selected are published by either the Hearst Corporation (*Marie Claire*) or Condé Nast (*Glamour, Self, Vanity Fair*—a subsidiary of Advance Publications, Inc.), two of the top three largest magazine publishers in the world. Articles were the focus of this study; advertisements with green themes were surprisingly prevalent, but these were excluded, since they would clearly distort an exploration of consumerist messages in environmental communication.

Glamour and *Marie Claire* were chosen to represent the typical women's lifestyle magazine, focused primarily on fashion and beauty. *Self* was chosen for its concentration on health and exercise, and *Vanity Fair* because it tends to incorporate deeper coverage of political and social issues. All nonsponsored content was checked for environmental content, and every item that included environmental messages was analyzed. The sample, being quite small and not random, is clearly not generalizable to the entire universe of women's magazines. Rather, I have attempted to deliberately choose mainstream magazines that might be expected to offer a range of different topics and perspectives to a wide readership.[1] Three of these four magazines are published for a female audience. *Vanity Fair* is not explicitly aimed at women, but the readership is heavily skewed that way: only 21 percent of its readers are men (Condé Nast 2009c), so any environmental messages therein will still be consumed by a primarily female audience. Readers of all four magazines are likely to be in their mid- to late-thirties, to be college educated, and to have a yearly household income around or slightly above seventy thousand dollars (which is about 40 percent more than the national average) (Condé Nast, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Hearst 2009).

Deftly incorporating feminist-sounding language, *Glamour* claims to "empower" readers to make the best lifestyle choices (Condé Nast 2009a). The April 2009 issue marked the magazine's seventieth anniversary. In celebration, editor in chief Cindi Leive describes *Glamour*'s mission: to prove that "any woman armed with a little self-confidence (mandatory) and lipstick (optional) can feel, look, and live like a superstar" (2009, 37). A *Glamour* girl lives an "aspirational, yet accessible, lifestyle," always interested in "the world around her" (Condé Nast, 2009a). In a similar vein, *Marie Claire*'s media kit describes the magazine as being "edited for a sexy, stylish, confident woman who is never afraid to make intelligence part of her wardrobe" (Condé Nast, 2009b), and *Self* is a "blueprint for the woman who wants to stay informed, get inspired, grow and achieve her personal goals" (Condé Nast, 2009c). Condé Nast (2009c) describes *Vanity Fair* in more ambitious terms: "*Vanity Fair* is a cultural catalyst—a magazine that provokes and drives the popular dialogue." It is interesting to note that the non-gender-specific publication is the only one that aspires to reach outside the individual reader.

Analysis

Multiple topics were uncovered during analysis. Health concerns were addressed more than once. To a lesser extent, environmental activism was discussed as well. But the most prevalent theme was green consumerism, which appeared in all four issues. Using the marketing approach, these magazines have presented consumer behavior as environmentalist behavior. The "environmentalist" identity is usually not fully explained and thus becomes an empty signifier. The result of this omission is the fetishization of green products, spurred on by a cycle of conspicuous green consumption.

As part of its seventieth anniversary issue (and as a passing nod to Earth Day, April 22), *Glamour* included a three-page photo spread of "female eco achievers," followed by a crib sheet outlining today's most pressing environmental issues. The women, dressed in clean white shirts and blue jeans, are casually arranged amid tall trees in a pristine, shady glen. Extending the seventieth-anniversary theme, the accompanying article states, "In the 70 years *Glamour*'s been around, we've made major inroads with sexism and racism. Now we'll be fighting for environmentalism, too, over the *next* 70 years and beyond" (Sole-Smith 2009, 196). The overall tone is extremely self-congratulatory: *Glamour* readers have been making a difference by recycling, unplugging their cell phone chargers, and buying green products.

Although the context is sometimes thin and the rhetoric mirrors the "simple steps" discourse often associated with the marketing approach to environmentalism, this article embodies some of the positive potential of female-targeted environmental communication. Some substantive information about environmental issues and politics is offered, for example, that "environmental issues have displaced *seven* times more people than war" (Sole-Smith 2009, 196). Relevant sources are quoted, including former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan and long-term US presidential advisor Carol Browner. And while the intricately staged photo does little to indicate that environmental activism can be challenging, it does depict a large and relatively diverse pool of female environmentalist role models (the group, ages seventeen to sixty-six, includes Latina, African American, and Asian women). When compared to the commodified subject matter and exclusionary tone of the other examples, *Glamour*'s

"Eco-Special" is the most promising example of woman-focused environmental communication.

Sandilands argues that what is being sold in green consumerism is not really the product, but the *feeling* of being green (1993). Therefore, the green product is fetishized and the details of its production and environmental footprint become a secondary consideration. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the most troubling type of environmental communication, which amounts to little more than decontextualized shopping lists. Instead of providing relevant information that women could use to make their own shopping decisions, these only serve to identify an object of desire to be pursued and purchased whether it is needed or not.

In *Marie Claire*, a photo collage presents thirty different products under the title "Green Pieces" (2009). The caption reads, "From vegan ultra-suede to recycled straw, what could be more natural and planet preserving than embracing spring's organic style?" However, the "green" attributes of each piece are not specified. Beyond price, manufacturer and a web address at which to purchase the product, no information is offered and no explanation is given for why the products are environmentally friendly. Likewise, a similar example in *Glamour* provides almost no supporting evidence of what makes the featured products "green." In this case, words that are recognizably associated with environmentalism ("recycled," "renewable," "sustainable," "non-toxic") do appear next to clothing and beauty products, but no link between these buzzwords and environmental problems is established (Bush 2009, 128). The guest editor who selected the featured items is identified as an earth-friendly clothing designer, but no background information is provided to support this title. Referring to the significant price tag attached to some of the items, the tagline proclaims, "Good-for-the-planet stuff is a fine reason to spend more," again associating a readiness to spend money with environmental concern. In *Vanity Fair*, another product spread features only beauty products. Under each item, ingredient lists are featured prominently as evidence of the products' ecofriendliness: "infusion of herbs," "botanical mix," "antioxidant-rich plants" ("Hot Looks" 2009, 68). These phrases sound ecofriendly but still lack environmental context. Finally, the absence of pricing information gives the impression that the intended audience would not be concerned with cost, once again equating concern with willingness to pay.

One list of products does a better job than the others of providing useful background information about the featured items: a half-page column

in *Marie Claire*'s "Love/Sex" section that, perhaps ironically, manages to avoid fetishizing the products it presents by offering a brief explanation of how each item is green: "powered by the sun," "made from recycled car and truck tire parts," "organic formula" (Thorogood 2009, 192).

Slightly more context is provided in *Self*'s multipage collection of beauty tips. Unlike the content that maintained a tight focus on consumer products, this example includes suggestions about how to limit waste, make natural beauty treatments, and make sense of "eco-buzzwords" on product labels (Mahoney 2009). Although this piece doesn't make direct recommendations to purchase certain products, the focus is never far from consumer choices (organic bamboo washcloths versus single-use cleansing pads, natural-fiber-bristle brush versus exfoliating body scrub, foil-free versus traditional hair highlights, elaborate versus recyclable packing, etc.). The environmentally concerned rhetoric is limited, however, by a deprecating comment about "green" women, who presumably "slap mayo on [their] face[s]" and "bathe in patchouli" (Mahoney 2009, 51).

Other articles focus on messages about health. Previous research on women's magazines has identified a tendency to make women feel obligated to actively pursue healthy behaviors and "achieve" health for themselves and their families (Hinnant 2009). Frequently, the healthy behaviors suggested involve individual consumer decisions rather than systemic factors. In *Glamour*, an article titled "5 Foods Every Woman Should Eat Organic" contains "healthy eating tips from green guru Alan Green, M.D." (Green 2009, 144). The advice is dominated by references to human health concerns: organic dairy contains more beta-carotene, organic tomatoes have more lycopene, and organophosphates on conventional apples can damage brain cells. The author, a male physician, says that pregnancy is associated with a desire to eat organic, and "childbearing years" are mentioned. Readers are thus encouraged to adopt new eating behaviors in order to meet expectations of the motherhood role.

Messages that directly address environmental issues are a secondary matter, although they are still present to a greater degree here than they have been in much of the content surveyed so far. For example, the article correctly mentions that organic farming practices have reduced greenhouse gases and that buying organic produce will lower chemical loads in planetary air and water systems. *Self* also contains a quarter-page section on the health benefits of eating sustainably produced food (Ryan 2009). In this article, concerns that are commonly incorporated into environmentalist

discourse are included, but not identified as such. For example, local food is recommended over that which has been transported long distances, pesticide residue is identified as a problem, and overfishing is denounced. But instead of environmental issues, the text primarily appeals to health concerns: women should look for more omega-3 fatty acids and folate, but avoid mercury. There is also an element of "authenticity." By checking the label, consumers can ensure that they will be "authentically re-creating foreign delicacies" like Argentine *asado*-grilled beef (Ryan 2009, 84). This detail implies that enjoying exotic food and having the ability to prepare it *authentically* are sophisticated and prestigious activities. Again, this example falls short of offering any sort of substantive explanation about what makes the products and practices environmentally friendly.

The most interesting part of *Glamour*'s "5 Things Every Woman Should Eat Organic" is that it suggests swapping one weekly serving of meat for a vegetable-based protein because "it takes 32 times more energy to produce 100 calories of beef than it does plant food" (Green 2009, 150). This sends a different message from those of the other suggestions; buying an organic version of the same foods is not the same as giving up a food altogether (for one meal, at least). Although the message here still focuses on privatized, individual behavior, the suggested motivation is public interest (energy reduction) rather than self-interest (health). In *Self*, on the other hand, the recommended behaviors are only significant on a household level, and seem to be motivated purely by self-interest rather than by environmental concern. These messages conform to what Sandilands identifies as eco-morality, which requires women to conform to green behavior standards but does not require a rethinking of behavioral processes (1993).

Of the articles that were analyzed, only two—both of which appeared in *Vanity Fair*—had no green commodity component at all. The first, "Bohemian Tragedy," attacks the ultraexclusive and conservative Bohemian Club, which has been quietly and aggressively logging old-growth forest located on its property in California (Shoumatoff 2009). The second, "How the West Was Saved," presents a historical account of the environmental policies of President Theodore Roosevelt, arguing that he "did more for the long-term protection of wilderness than all of his White House successors combined" (Brinkley 2009, 170). Both of these articles are written by men and focus on the actions of other men. Perhaps this is not surprising, considering that the magazine is not aimed at a female

audience. However, since most of the audience *is* female, we might wonder how these predominantly masculine messages could be interpreted.

In the first article, written by Alex Shoumatoff, both the antagonist group (the Bohemian Club) and the protagonist group (the Bohemian Redwood Rescue Club) are composed of an all-male membership. Every expert the author consulted is a man. In fact, the only woman who figures at all into the story is Caryl Hart, wife of musician (and Bohemian Club member) Mickey Hart. Mrs. Hart is portrayed as a proforest activist, although a self-contradicting one (she defends the club's exploitative timber management proposal). Still, it is not Hart's own agency but rather her status as a club member's wife that gives her legitimacy in Shoumatoff's narrative. In Douglas Brinkley's article about President Roosevelt, women are again conspicuously absent. The only reference to the activities or concerns of women is a negative one: at the turn of the century, bird species were being hunted to extinction to provide fancy plumage for women's hats. This depiction is an early instance of commodity fetishism, in which avian colonies "were being wiped out just so women could make a fashion statement" (2009, 161). The *Vanity Fair* articles contained an insidious subtext: women either support the environmental agency of men or act as an obstacle to the environmentalist goals of men. In these cases, the possibility of meaningful feminine agency is omitted. This is particularly troubling because although *Vanity Fair* is ostensibly a non-gender-specific publication, it reaches a predominantly female audience.

Some of the items were small, but still revealing. For example, *Marie Claire*'s "Designer Dossier" section prominently features a quote from "eco-chic" fashion designer Simon Keenan, who identifies a healthy planet as "the ultimate luxury" (Corrigan 2009, 56). Keenan also says, "A lot of us [designers] are thinking big-picture" when it comes to the environment, a statement that simultaneously assures the consumer that environmental problems are being addressed by elites and that shopping for ecofriendly fashion is a legitimate way to pitch in (56). *Vanity Fair*'s social calendar makes brief reference to a "sustainable style" museum exhibit, where "top-tier designers will display works concerned with conservation" ("Sustainable Style," 2009, 58). As in the "Designer Dossier" in *Marie Claire*, the message here is that the fashion elite are busy tackling environmental issues, leaving us to only observe or consume their work.

Another short blurb in *Marie Claire* informs readers about an artist's

multimedia memorial to destroyed parts of the planet ("Maya Lin's Monumental Work" 2009, 92). Interestingly, the artist herself observes that individualist behaviors are what have caused environmental degradation and suggests that it follows logically that individuals' behaviors will be the key to reducing it. This observation is troubling, because hyperindividualist rhetoric is often considered antithetical to the foundational concerns of both feminism and environmentalism.

Finally, tucked away in the front matter of *Glamour* and nearly obscured by a list of editorial staff members is a small photo of environmentalist Rachel Carson flanked by the caption "Her book *Silent Spring* kicked off the environmental movement" ("Which Woman of the Past 70 Years Has Inspired You?" 2009, 22). This example seems to lack any of the consumer overtones that have been identified in most of the messages so far, but its small size and out-of-the-way location make it likely to be overlooked and its sound-bite style provides no substantive information.

One article in *Marie Claire* represents a missed opportunity, even more so than any of the others. "She Lives Off What We Throw Away" sketches the freegan lifestyle of a young mother living in New York City. Freeganism is a movement that explicitly rejects consumer culture. Followers survive by foraging for food and home items in urban trash piles and dumpsters. Grocery stores, restaurants, and private households routinely dispose of still-edible food and other usable products in sufficient quantities to sustain an estimated five hundred people in the New York area (Goodwin 2009, 114). The author makes direct reference to the astonishing amount of waste that is the byproduct of American consumerism, which presents an opportunity for comment on the environmental impact of overconsumption. Instead, freegans are portrayed as "extreme greens": eccentric and quirky scavengers rather than rational utilitarians. The phrase "an alternative to capitalism" is sandwiched between references to "renegade rhetoric" and "eating garbage" (116). Unfortunately, the article aims to radicalize freeganism and legitimate wasteful behaviors (for example, bruised produce is "instinctively" rejected, and unwanted home furnishings are referred to as "detritus"). While green consumerism is not explicitly endorsed over freeganism, the latter is clearly being rhetorically marginalized.

Conclusion: The Ecofetish

Despite its ideological flaws, the marketing approach continues to be popular in the media, perhaps because green consumerism offers "fewer barriers and richer rewards" than other types of environmentalist behavior (Guber 2003). Not only does purchasing green products offer instant gratification, but such behavior can also be highly visible (such as driving a hybrid car), while remaining politically inconspicuous (a hybrid car without a green-sloganed bumper sticker is less overt than a gas-powered car with such a sticker). In other words, the prestige of buying expensive and trendy green products does not require a political investment (i.e., substantive knowledge or commitment to a cause). Rather, green purchasing can simply be part of a prestige cycle. This cycle is started when the media adopts the rhetoric of privatized, commodified solutions to environmental problems, which becomes part of the "environmentalist" female identity constructed by magazines (socially concerned, affluent, and preoccupied with the health of ourselves and our families) (Sandilands 1993). The prestige cycle is perpetuated as wealthy women purchase and display trendy environmentally friendly products and middle-class women seek to emulate them—behavior that economist Thorstein Veblen called conspicuous consumption, which women's magazines avidly encourage (1912).

Adorno tells us that it is the intoxicating act of buying that concerns us rather than the actual product itself (1991), a negation of the more hopeful position taken by Scammell (2000). For a green product, use value might be tied to sustainable production and distribution methods, but in consumer culture the exchange value becomes more important. As consumers, we are worshipping not only the money it costs to buy the product (Adorno 1991), but also what it indicates about us as environmentally concerned individuals. The environmental context of a "green" product therefore ceases to matter—it has been ecofetishized.

The potential of environmental communication in women's magazines to be a site of politically motivated behavior seems to have been wholly subsumed by the ecofetish. Green consumerism is potentially a symbolic way to confront environmental problems and create a green identity, but unfortunately my analysis doesn't indicate that this potential is being realized. The environmental messages I surveyed seemed elitist and occasionally sexist, and were based on the divisive neoliberal rhetoric of individual

self-interest. The articles and other items in these four magazines primarily encourage conspicuous green consumption: a self-conscious emulation of social elites, depoliticized and stripped of any significant consideration of the products' environmental impact (Veblen 1912).

According to Sandilands, a truly feminist "green" political stance would imply a need to consume less rather than just consuming differently, in order to subvert the problematic feminine environmentalist identity that is present in the green consumer messages women receive (1993). Unfortunately, such a stance was mostly absent from the admittedly small sample I analyzed. Although my sample was limited, this study clearly illuminates a need for more research on environmental communication in women's magazines. Further research, potentially focused on audience reception, could reveal what effect the green consumerist discourse is having on readers and whether ecofetishization is having a negative impact on readers' levels of environmental knowledge. The pervasive marketing approach to environmentalism encourages people to believe that simply consuming green commodities will help the environment in a meaningful way. This green consumerist discourse that appears so frequently in women's magazines should be a concern to feminist and environmental scholars alike, since women (whose agency has long been tied to consumerism) are perhaps uniquely positioned to be targeted by such messages. But green consumerism without context is merely ecofetishization, and women can't expect to simply buy their way into environmentalism, despite popular messages to the contrary.

Note

1. A significant amount of previous scholarly analysis has been conducted around *Cosmopolitan* (see, for example, Machin and Thornborrow 2003; Machin and van Leeuwen 2003; Gupta, Zimmerman, and Fruhauf 2008). Although it is an exceedingly popular mainstream magazine, *Cosmopolitan* was deliberately excluded in an attempt to expand the existent body of research on women's magazines.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr. Matt McAllister for his assistance in revising an earlier draft of this essay and to the editors and reviewers at *WSQ* for their insightful comments.

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